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164 PROPOSALS ON APPOINTING HC JUDGES IN CONSIDERATION

Law minister informs Parliament about the judge-selection process conducted by the Supreme Court collegium and govt

406 JUDGE VACANCIES IN HIGH COURTS

A total of 164 proposals on appointing high court judges are at different stages of consideration, Kiren Rijiju said in response to a Rajya Sabha question. High courts have a vacancy of 406 judges while the apex court has one. This year, nine apex court judges and 118 high court judges were appointed. Currently, no high court has a woman Chief Justice | P9

HUGE CASE BACKLOG IN LOWER JUDICIARY

- Of the proposals to appoint HC judges, 55 have been either remitted or returned on SC collegium's advice to HCs this year
- While 70,038 cases are pending in the Supreme Court, 56,42,858 are pending in the various high courts. In the lower judiciary, a staggering 3,79,42,466 cases are pending, according to Rijiju

1,098

COMBINED SANCTIONED STRENGTH OF JUDGES IN 25 HIGH COURTS

CHENNAI • MADURAI • VIJAYAWADA • BENGALURU • KOCHI • HYDERABAD • VISAKHAPATNAM • COIMBATORE • KOZHIKODE • THIRUVANANTHAPURAM • BELAGAVI • BHUBANESWAR • SHIVAMOGGA • MANGALURU • TIRUPATI • TIRUCHY • TIRUNELVELI • SAMBALPUR • HUBBALLI • DHARMAPURI • KOTTAYAM • KANNUR • VILLUPURAM • KOLLAM • WARANGAL • TADEPALLIGUDEM • NAGAPATTINAM • THRISSUR • KALABURAGI

India's first 2 Omicron cases found in B'luru

One is a doctor with no history of travel, while the other, a South Africa national, flew to Dubai late last month

CHETANA BELAGERE @ Bengaluru

KARNATAKA on Thursday reported India's first two Covid-19 cases with the new Omicron variant. While one is a medical doctor from Bengaluru with no travel history, the other was a South African national who has left India for Dubai.

While on the one hand, the local authorities, including the state Health Minister, are asking people not to panic, they have expressed fears of community spread as the Bengaluru doctor had no travel history and five of his contacts have also tested positive for Covid-19. Their genome sequencing reports are awaited.

The announcement was made by the Union Health Ministry at a press conference in New Delhi on Thursday. Calling for calm and strict surveillance, Joint Secretary, Union Ministry of Health, Lav Agarwal said, "Two Covid-19 cases of the Omicron variant have been detected in Karnataka, in two men aged 46 and 66. The Indian SARS-CoV-2 Genomics Consortium (INSACOG), which monitors the genomic variations of the virus, has confirmed this. There is no reason to panic, but we need to be monitoring the situation and follow Covid-appropriate behaviour."

Karnataka Health Minister Dr K Sudhakar, giving out more details, said the 46-year-old is a medical doctor, a resident of Bommanahalli in Bengaluru, and he had voluntarily got himself tested on November 21 after he showed symptoms like fatigue, fever and bodyache. His RT-PCR test returned positive for Covid-19 on November 22.

"Karnataka's genome committee has laid down protocols which say that any positive sample with low CT value, indicating high viral load, have to be sent for genome sequence testing. Hence, the doctor's samples were sent while he had isolated himself already. The genome reports came on December 2, confirming that he was infected with the Omicron variant," Dr Sudhakar explained. P3,9

WHY THE FEAR ABOUT OMICRON VARIANT

- Scientists have found that the Omicron variant underwent 30 amino acid changes, three deletions and one insertion in the spike protein as compared to the original virus from Wuhan.
- The spike protein is what attaches itself to the human cell receptors to gain entry and destroy the cells.
- The variant also has three mutations in the furin cleavage site, which increases SARS-CoV-2 infectivity.
- Scientists feel this could be the reason for this variant's higher infection rate.
- But it is still unclear whether Omicron is more transmissible than other variants, including the Delta.
- Epidemiological studies are under way to understand the new variant and how much more (or less) potent it is compared to its predecessor variants.
- 29 countries have reported 373 cases of Omicron so far

Passengers arrive from Singapore at the Indira Gandhi International Airport in New Delhi on Thursday | PTI

HOW IT CAN BE DETECTED

Current RT-PCR tests can detect the variant.

But some labs have indicated that a widely used PCR test does not detect one of the 3 target genes. This detection (S gene target failure) can serve as a marker for Omicron.

ADVISORY

- Best way to remain safe from any of the SARS-CoV-2 variants is to follow safe Covid-appropriate behaviour
- Wear your masks properly
- Strictly follow hand hygiene as often as you can
- Continue maintaining social distance
- Most importantly, get yourselves vaccinated and complete the dosage

NATIONWIDE	DEC 01	DEC 02
Fresh cases	8,954	9,765
Recoveries	10,204	8,548
Deaths	267	477

KARNATAKA	DEC 01	DEC 02
Fresh cases	322	363
Recoveries	162	191
Deaths	2	3

TAKE YOUR SHOT
Dec 01: 71,33,040 doses
Dec 02: 64,21,362 doses
TOTAL DOSES

CM to meet experts today, discuss new guidelines

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @ Bengaluru

HOURS after the Centre announced the detection of the Omicron variant in two samples from Bengaluru, Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai, who held a meeting with Union Health Minister Mansukh Mandaviya in New Delhi on Thursday, said an emergency meeting with experts will be held in Bengaluru on Friday afternoon to discuss the state's strategy to contain the spread of the new variant.

The CM said there is a need for new guidelines to contain the spread and they will decide on it after Friday's meeting.

"Preliminary reports indicate that though the new variant spreads (fast), it doesn't require hospitalisation. However, we will get all the details once we get the complete lab test reports on Friday, which will also give us an idea on treatment protocols," Bommai told media persons in New Delhi on Thursday.

Bommai held two rounds of talks with Mandaviya — once before the Centre announced the detection of the Omicron cases, and again in the evening to discuss the Covid-19 situation.

The National Centre For Biological Sciences (NCBS) lab report has confirmed the Omicron strain in two persons, the CM said.

CONTINUED ON: P4

SYMPTOMS DIFFERENT FROM THAT OF DELTA?

- Extreme tiredness and body pain
- No loss of smell or taste

While WHO says the symptoms of Omicron are not different, South African doctors say most Omicron patients have mild issues, such as extreme tiredness, body pain, besides sore throat, dry coughs and fever. Loss of taste or smell & low oxygen was typical of Delta

Brace for a bumpy year ahead as cars, houses to cost a lot more in '22

ARSHAD KHAN @ New Delhi

WITH commodity prices showing no signs of abating, year 2022 is going two be costlier on many fronts — especially if you were planning to buy a new car or a house. India's largest car maker Maruti Suzuki on Thursday said it would increase vehicle prices from January to offset the impact of the rise in raw material costs.

It is a common practice for automakers to go for a price hike of 2-4% in January every year. However this year, buyers will feel the pinch more as most leading automakers have gone for at least three price hikes in the past one year. For example, Maruti had increased the prices of its vehicles by 1.4% in January 2021, 1.6% in April and then again in September by 1.9% — taking the total quantum of increase to 4.9%.

Sources said Tata Motors, Mahindra & Mahindra and Hyundai will make similar announcements soon. Luxury automakers Mercedes Benz and Audi have already announced price hikes of 2% and 3%, respectively, from January 2022.

MSIL's senior executive director (marketing and sales) Shashank Srivastava had recently said the firm would be forced to hike vehicle prices with steel, aluminium, copper, plastic and precious metals becoming costlier. Steel prices, which stood at ₹38 per kg last April-May, shot up to ₹77 a kg this year. Similarly, aluminium which was available for $1,700-1,800 a tonne last year, now costs $2,700-2,800 per tonne.

If unchecked, this surge in metal prices, along with rising cement prices, is going to jack up property prices as well. "Housing developers' profit margins are already wafer-thin and the rising inflationary trend of basic input costs such as cement, steel and labour is a real challenge... Future price hikes seem inevitable," said Prashant Thakur, director & head of research at Anarock Group. Real estate industry body Credai had recently estimated housing prices to jump 10-15% in view of rising costs of construction raw materials.

CEMENT PRICE TO TOUCH ₹400 PER BAG: CRISIL

The retail price of cement, which has risen ₹10-15 per bag pan-India since August, is likely to swell by another ₹15-20 over the next few months, ratings agency Crisil said in a report on Thursday. The price could touch an all-time high of ₹400 per bag this fiscal due to costly inputs such as coal and diesel, it added

EXPRESS READ

India to have 9 nuclear reactors by 2024

New Delhi: The nation will have nine nuclear reactors by 2024 and a new nuclear project, the first in northern India, will come up 150 kms away from Delhi in Gorakhpur of Haryana, the government informed the Rajya Sabha.

Shorter India tour of South Africa likely

Chennai: India's tour to South Africa could be delayed due to concerns over Omicorn. Though BCCI is committed to full tour, officials are not ruling out a shorter tour after it emerged India players have to quarantine on arrival | P17

OPEC+ decision to up oil output jolts prices

Oil prices fell on Thursday as OPEC+ decided to keep on increasing crude output. Brent, the international benchmark, dropped 2% before recovering, as expectations were that oil output increases would be paused | P12

PARAM BIR SUSPENDED

The Maharashtra government on Thursday suspended IPS officer and former Mumbai police chief Param Bir Singh against whom FIRs were filed in connection to extortion | P10

WITH THIS ISSUE
CITY'S BEST WEEKEND GUIDE INDULGE
34 PAGES, INCLUDING 16 OF INDULGE (TABLOID)

Gloves are off as Cong hits back at Mamata

RICHA SHARMA @ New Delhi

WITH West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee making pointed attacks on the Congress, the latter began giving it back in equal measure, with the charge led by its young leaders to start with.

From calling Congress incompetent to saying there is no UPA, Mamata has been vocal in her criticism so as to wrest the Opposition leadership space. At her recent meeting with NCP chief Sharad Pawar in Mumbai, she is learnt to have floated the idea of regional parties forming an Opposition alliance and making seat arrangements for the 2024 Lok Sabha polls, while bringing the Congress to the table after the polls, sources said.

Separately, her strategist Prashant Kishor took a swipe at Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, calling for democratically electing the Opposition leadership, adding it was not the "divine right of an individual".

Congress leaders this newspaper spoke to said the party will drop its restraint and take on the Trinamool based on facts, though seniors would stay out for now.

The counterattack has already begun with party MPs Manickam Tagore, Syed Nasir Hussain and others saying Mamata has no business commenting on the UPA. A senior leader said the Congress is the principal opposition party with around 20% vote share in the 2019 elections. "The Trinamool Congress is limited to Bengal. They went chest thumping in Tripura but we saw the results in the local body polls. Goa Assembly results would further clear the air," the leader said.

SC gives Centre 24 hrs to fix Delhi pollution issue

KANU SARDA @ New Delhi

HINTING that it might create a task force to monitor pollution control measures, the Supreme Court on Thursday gave 24 hours to the Centre to take action to check the rising air pollution in Delhi-NCR.

"We are giving you 24 hours' time. We want you to take a hard look at this and come up with a solution with seriousness. We will take this up tomorrow morning. You update us about the steps, otherwise we will pass directions," a bench headed by Chief Justice N V Ramana told Solicitor General Tushar Mehta. "In an emergency situation, you have to work in emergent ways. Suppose the temperature goes up in fever, what can be done to control it?" the CJI said.

Mehta said he will respond after speaking with the minister. "We are not averse to this and the highest functionaries are equally worried," he said.

The SC also pulled up the Delhi government for reopening schools and exposing children to air pollution.

Chinese nano drones on Customs radar

S LALITHA @ Bengaluru

PEOPLE'S desire to purchase drones cheap online from China-based outlets, clubbed with complete ignorance of rules, has resulted in the Customs department in Karnataka dispatching a total of 1,213 drones to the Union Ministry of Home Affairs and Ministry of Defence so far. The consignments had reached the Foreign Post Office (FPO) at Chamarajpet, Bengaluru, in individual parcels over a period of a year.

Reliable sources told TNIE, "Nearly 95 per cent of these are nano drones while the rest are micro drones. The nano ones are like toy drones, weigh up to 50 gm and can reach a height of 30-40 feet only. However, they cannot be purchased without permission from the government. Since they are available for prices ranging between Rs 1,000 to Rs 5,000, depending on the product from e-commerce sites, many show keenness to purchase them."

The drones are easily visible when the parcel is run through scanners at the FPO. The Customs department carries out "an absolute confiscation" for drones imported in this fashion, another source explained. The department issues a show-cause notice to the addressee asking the individual to explain why it was purchased and the lack of authorisation for it. "Most people do not respond to the notice but a few reply saying it was bought for their children and they did not know the rules. A fine of Rs 5,000 is also levied, but again very few pay up. But we do not pursue that as it is mostly ignorance and not any male fide intention on the part of buyers," he added. P7

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